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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MORE ON USG FUNDING OF SYRIAN OPPOSITION

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The USG's Syrian Democracy Announcement continues to provoke conflicting views here among the opposition and other political figures. Reftel reported on an initial sounding that produced primarily negative views. A second look at the issue has prompted a more nuanced set of reactions. Some have welcomed the initiative, saying that it sends the message that the U.S. supports the opposition and will not make any "deal" with the Asad regime; however, they still questioned whether the funding would reach sincere regime opponents. One contact described the initial negative reaction among the opposition as overblown, "but typical." Several contacts offered the outlines of funding proposals or broader suggestions about ways in which the U.S. could use modest funding to support civil society and democratic development in Syria. One prominent dissident and former political prisoner, echoing lingering suspicions about U.S. intentions, called the proposal "insulting." In his view, the U.S. was hypocritical about its support of democracy in the region and was looking for "tools" rather than partners. There has been little or no public support expressed for the funding. End Summary.

¶2. (C) WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MONEY IN A SUITCASE? Independent MP Basil Dahdouh acknowledged that the funding sent an important message of support to the opposition here, indicating that the U.S. "is serious" about cooperating. That message would serve to encourage the opposition. However, the manner in which the money has been offered is "too bureaucratic, legalistic, and public to be effective, he added. "Things aren't done like that in this region," said Dahdouh. "Khalid Misha'al visits Tehran and gets a few million in a suitcase. He doesn't fill out paperwork or log onto a computer for it," he added. While the manner in which the U.S. offered the funding corresponds to a state with laws and regulations, "it does not correspond to the mentality in the region." Finally, said Dahdouh, the public nature of the funding, given America's image in the Arab world, would destroy the credibility of anybody who seeks it. People will respond, "Well, of course he said this or that. He's taking money from the Americans."

¶3. (C) BROADER SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORT: Regarding suggestions for areas where the U.S. could offer more discreet support the opposition, Dahdouh suggested a program of financial support for the families of political prisoners, amounting to a few hundred dollars a month for each family. That would alleviate the "huge risk of family impoverishment" that accompanies the incarceration of any dissident. While admitting that the mechanism for implementing such a program

is not readily evident, Dahdouh pointed to the ICRC as a possibility. He also suggested that the U.S. beef up all of its cultural outreach programs, including speaker programs, scholarships for English language instruction, and internet access. In his view, the U.S. could use cultural relations to funnel in small but effective amounts of money (or equivalent value), via a creative use of scholarships, prizes, small stipends for speakers and panelists, and so forth. The key was not necessarily to seek to be controversial, but to have regular programs where people got

together, and where some small amounts of money could be spread around. Dahdouh also suggested a translation center at PD that would focus not on the headlines or on "the loudest voices" (which are nearly always regime-supported), but alternate views with serious intellectual content. The center would also function as a vehicle for spreading around some informal subsidies.

¶4. (C) GOOD MESSAGE EVEN IF NO ONE TAKES MONEY: Ayman Abdul Noor, founder of All4Syria, an investigative news website, concurred with others in applauding "the message that Washington is sending." In Abdul Noor's view, it is less important that "no one will apply for the money" because of the public nature of the funding and application process. The program "rips away the regime's cover" that it has used in the past few months to send out rumors and signals of a secret deal with Washington. The regime had used such false

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signals to help create the environment for a crackdown on civil society and the rest of the opposition. The funding also reinforces the message that the Administration transmitted when it froze the assets of SMI chief Asif Shawkat, underlining that it cannot work with -- and will make no deal with -- this regime, insisted Abdul Noor. In addition, the announcement of funding helps rattle the confidence of the regime and sends it the unsettling reminder that it has real enemies plotting against it -- possibly working with former VP Khaddam and certainly focusing on the UNIIIC investigation -- including the U.S., the Saudis, and the French, added Abdul Noor. The Ba'athist reformer expressed the hope that the U.S., in its next step, would use terrorist financing concerns as a pretext for an attack on regime corruption, in which the money of regime financiers like Rami Makhlouf and Mohammed Hamsho, among others, would be investigated. "This would drive them crazy," said Abdul Noor.

¶5. (C) Human rights activist Anwar Bunni reacted to discussion in the Syrian opposition community about the USG funding announcement by asking rhetorically, "What's the problem? Japan sends money, the EU sends money.⁸ Without offering specifics, however, Bunni said the USG's statement announcing the funding was "too pro-opposition⁸ and created fear among the opposition members that it left them vulnerable to the charge of serving as agents of the U.S."

¶6. (C) INITIAL OPPOSITION REACTION CALLED OVERBLOWN: Fellow human rights activist Reizan Zeitouni told Poloff she welcomed the announcement and said that the negative public reaction from civil society and other opposition elements had been overblown. It was typical of the way the opposition overreacted -- as it did to the reports of a Muslim Brotherhood/Khaddam dialogue -- and ended up unwittingly parroting a regime point of view, she asserted.

¶7. (C) KURDS POSITIVE: Hassan Saleh and Faisel Badr of the Kurdish Yekiti Party, in a February 24 meeting with Poloff, also offered a positive reaction and said they will attempt to find an international partner and put together a proposal, although they are still trying to formulate what the project would look like. They said they would prefer direct funding for party activities but could not enunciate what types of programs this funding would support. One area they mentioned included a Kurdish cultural center or a women/youth center that could include a cultural component.

¶8. (C) Intellectual gadfly Nabil Fayyad said that he plans to apply for support for his newly established Center for Liberal Studies,⁸ which focuses on fundamentalism and minority issues. Fayyad added that he will be contacting his extensive network of international contacts to find a partner. (Comment: We understand that Fayyad, in his long intellectual battle against Islamic fundamentalism in Syria and the region, has cultivated a somewhat quirky array of allies in Europe. Any funding proposal from him would require extra attention to ensure that such bedfellows would not become an embarrassment to the USG.)

¶9. (C) A DISSIDENT'S CRITICISMS: Dissident Yassin Haj Saleh, imprisoned for 18 years by the Asad regime, offered the most sustained criticism of the funding proposal, telling Polchief it is "insulting," and calling for the U.S. "to please stop dealing with us in a disrespectful way." When asked to elaborate, Saleh noted that the U.S. is hypocritical in its support of democracy in the Arab world, voicing support for democracy in Syria but not in Palestine, where the U.S. wanted to ignore a democratically elected Hamas government. "You cut off millions going to Palestine and then offer pennies to Syrian democracy. You are looking for tools, for subordinates, not for partners and friends," insisted Saleh.

¶10. (C) In Saleh's view, the U.S. "remains deeply hostile to the very idea of Arab independence, even now," years after the end of the Cold War and decades after Nasser's disappearance from the scene. The "biggest gift the U.S. could make" to democracy in Syria is to issue statements criticizing the Israeli occupation of the Golan, backed up by calls for withdrawal and support for real negotiations, said Saleh. Saleh also noted that the people in Syria who will accept the U.S. funding "are the least sincere among the Syrian opposition." He said the U.S. could spend the money better by offering scholarships to needy Syrian students to study in the U.S.

¶11. (C) NO PUBLIC SUPPORT: Public reactions from opposition figures tended to divide between categorically critical statements from traditional nationalists and somewhat more nuanced formulations -- still rejecting the aid, in principle -- from those perceived as sympathetic to Western support. Hassan Abdul Azim, spokesperson of the National Democratic Gathering, a five-party opposition coalition made up of pan-Arabists and former Communists, said that his group refused any "financing from the Western side" and would

sanction any member who agreed to accept such funding. Activist Michel Kilo maintained that the problems of the Syrian opposition are political and not financial. He added, however, that the opposition did not want to receive American financial support because of "its policy in the Middle East and towards Palestine."

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